

Maneuver Warfare: Afghanistan and the Combat Load

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Introduction

The current Marine Corps policy on the wear of body armor and Personnel Protective Equipment (PPE) as outlined in MARADMIN 262/07 is highly restrictive, lacks common sense, and stands in contrast to the Marine Corps warfighting doctrine of Maneuver Warfare. In the current war in Afghanistan, the requirement to wear heavy, cumbersome and highly restrictive PPE and the blind adherence to this policy is an impediment to progress against our highly mobile, heavily armed enemy forces. When taken in context with MCDP-1 *Warfighting*, our primary maneuver centric warfighting doctrine, commanders at the battalion level should be afforded the opportunity determine what constitutes PPE and provided the authority and autonomy to dictate their own prescribed PPE load based on a solid estimate of the situation, historical precedence, individual experience and expertise.

MARADMIN 262/07

Released in April 2007 (resulting from a sharp increase in deadly IED/VBIED attacks in Iraq)¹² MARADMIN 262/07 defines Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), delineates who can prescribe PPE and who can alter the wear of PPE. Even after repeated complaints from deployed Marines across the globe the MARADMIN still stands.³ In order to avoid confusion Paragraph one defines PPE as:

PPE REFERS TO PROTECTIVE BODY ARMOR, HELMETS, GOGGLES, CLOTHING, AND OTHER GEAR DESIGNED TO PROTECT THE WEARERS BODY FROM BATTLEFIELD INJURIES. PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT INCLUDES, BUT IS NOT LIMITED TO, THE FOLLOWING ITEMS: OUTER TACTICAL VEST, MODULAR TACTICAL VEST, LIGHTWEIGHT HELMET, FULL-SPECTRUM BATTLE

EQUIPMENT, MILITARY EYE PROTECTION SYSTEMS (ESS ICE SPECTACLES / ESS PROFILE NVG GOGGLES), ENHANCED SMALL ARMS PROTECTIVE INSERT PLATES, SIDE SMALL ARMS PROTECTIVE INSERT PLATES, BALLISTIC PLATE CARRIER, QUAD GUARD, FLAME RESISTANT ORGANIZATIONAL GEAR AND COMBAT ARMS EARPLUGS.

When all PPE is worn in conjunction with a normal combat load, each Marine, regardless of age, sex, height or weight will carry no less than ninety pounds. Providing a Marine Corps-wide list of required PPE is highly questionable, yet the MARADMIN takes it one step further and explicitly defines who authorizes the wear of PPE and who, if anybody, can differentiate from the standard load. Paragraph three states:

MARINE COMPONENT AND/OR FUNCTIONAL COMPONENT/JOINT TASK FORCE (JTF) COMMANDERS WILL PRESCRIBE THE WEAR OF PPE FOR UNITS CONDUCTING OPERATIONS IN THEIR RESPECTIVE THEATER OF OPERATIONS. PPE REQUIREMENTS ESTABLISHED BY A FUNCTIONAL COMPONENT COMMANDER THAT ARE MORE INCLUSIVE (I.E. PRESCRIBE ADDITIONAL PPE ITEMS) THAN THOSE SET BY THE ASSOCIATED MARINE COMPONENT COMMANDER WILL BE MET BY MARINES/SAILORS SERVING UNDER THE DESIGNATED COMMAND.

Remarkably, in an organization which prides itself on mission-based orders and a decentralized command structure in which Marine leaders are encouraged to make decisions at the lowest level, all discretion and discernment has been taken away regarding what PPE is and who authorizes its wear. The requirement for the Joint Task Force Commander or Higher Headquarters Component Commander to dictate what Marines on the ground are required to wear is not decentralized decision making, but micromanagement to the core.

Paragraph four, provides even further detail by defining who can deviate, for whatever reason, from the prescribed wear of the required PPE. Paragraph 4 states:

SUBORDINATE COMMANDERS WILL HAVE THE AUTHORITY TO REQUIRE THEIR MARINES/SAILORS TO WEAR ADDITIONAL LEVELS OF PPE BASED ON THEIR ESTIMATE OF THE SITUATION, TO INCLUDE ASSESSMENTS OF ENEMY THREAT, ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS, AND THE TACTICAL MISSIONS ASSIGNED TO THEIR UNITS. SUBORDINATE COMMANDERS WHO DETERMINE THAT A LOWER LEVEL (I.E. FEWER PPE ITEMS) OF PPE IS APPROPRIATE MUST RECEIVE APPROVAL FROM THEIR RESPECTIVE USMC AND/OR FUNCTIONAL COMPONENT/JTF COMMANDER PRIOR TO EXECUTION OF ANY CHANGE.

Paragraph three effectively strips commanders at the tactical level the autonomy to dictate their own individual PPE. Yet, if a commander would like to add to the PPE requirement he may do so provided he takes into account “their estimate of the situation, to include assessments of enemy threat, environmental conditions, and the tactical missions assigned to their units.” If a commander deems it essential to add to the PPE requirement after conducting a detailed estimate of the situation, then why do the same rules not apply to the selection and wear of PPE in the first place?

Summary of MARADMIN 262/07

Within the contents of one page of one MARADMIN the Marine Corps has specifically defined PPE, designated JTF or HHQ Component Commanders as the individuals who can prescribe the load. Furthermore, they have removed all practical discretionary decision making ability away from maneuver commanders who desire to differentiate in the wear of PPE. This micromanaging, highly centralized approach to PPE defies logic and common sense. Simply stated, one set standard of PPE is not compatible to every climate, geographical region or territory. Furthermore, in an organization that prides itself in “mission based orders”

commanders, must be provided with realistic discretionary input regarding the wear of PPE regardless of the mission, location or situation.

MCDP-1 Warfighting

A detailed list specifying what does and does not constitute as PPE and the requirement to wear such gear at all times defies logic and stands in stark contrast to the fundamental Marine Corps Warfighting Doctrine of Maneuver Warfare as spelled out in MCDP-1. Specifically, three key areas from *Warfighting* that are not compatible with MARADM 262/07.

Equipment the Human Dimension and Self Induced Friction

Military leaders with an elementary knowledge of the history of warfare can easily understand and grasp the evolution of arms and armor on the battlefield and the central role they have played in determining who is victorious. Indeed history has demonstrated the fallacy of warriors who subject themselves to a strict adherence to excessive PPE. Excessive weight combined with the human dimension has repeatedly proven to be disastrous. MCDP-1 clearly explains the significance:

“Equipment is useful only if it increases combat effectiveness.” (MCDP-1 Pg. 66)

“. . .The human dimension is essential in war. . . war is an extreme trial of moral and physical strength and stamina.” (MCDP-1 Pg. 13)

As quoted in MCDP-1 Clausewitz defines friction as “the force that makes the apparently easy so difficult.” (MCDP -1 pg. 5)

“Friction is the force that resist all action and saps energy. It makes the simple difficult and the difficult seemingly impossible.” (MCDP-1 pg. 5)

When considering the requirement to wear in excess of ninety pounds of gear and PPE at all times, regardless of the operating environment, one can clearly see how Warfighting and MARADM 262/07 are non-compatible. A blind adherence to PPE, increases human factors in

combat and catalyzes inexcusable self-induced friction. MARADM 262/07 fails to take into consideration: Marines are human beings and actually have to wear all of the required PPE, and, Marines do not conduct combat operations in a peaceful climate controlled areas with flat terrain.

Presently, numerous indicators at the operational and strategic level point to an increased American military presence in the rugged mountainous terrain of eastern Afghanistan. The Marine Corps primary opponents in the highly restrictive Afghanistan terrain are the lightly clad, heavily armed and highly mobile dismounted Al Qaeda and Taliban terrorist cells. The sheer weight and restrictive nature of the current combat load would exasperate and multiply the amount of friction on the battlefield. If one were to substitute the words “ninety pound combat load with all required PPE” in place of the word “Friction” in the above quotes from MCDP-1 this point becomes very clear.

Speed, Initiative and Surprise

A theme throughout *Warfighting* is the need to utilize speed in order seize the initiative and surprise the enemy where they least expect it. One can understand how adhering to the wear of PPE can seriously degrade the necessary requirement. MCDP-1 states:

“Inherent in Maneuver Warfare is the need for speed to seize the initiative, dictate the terms of action and keep the enemy off balance thereby increasing his friction.” (MCDP-1 pg. 74)

“Warfighting doctrine based on rapid, flexible and, opportunistic maneuver.” (MCDP-1 pg. 72)

“Maneuver relies on speed and surprise for with out either we cannot concentrate strength against enemy weakness.” (MCDP-1 pg. 38)

“Speed is a weapon. . . Superior speed allows us to seize the initiative and dictate the terms of action, forcing the enemy to react to us.” (MCDP-1 pg. 40-41)

“. . . we should take all measures to improve our own speed while degrading our enemy’s.” (MCDP-1 pg. 41)

“Surprise is based on speed. Strength, ambiguity and deception.” (MCDP-1 pg. 43)

“We achieve surprise by striking the enemy at a time and place or in a manner for which the enemy is prepared.” (MCDP-1 pg. 42)

Historically, the indigenous fighters in Afghanistan, have primarily conducted offensive operations in mountainous regions, at high altitudes, utilizing foot paths as primary maneuver and infiltration routes. In order to be effective Marines must focus on seizing the initiative and surprise the enemy when and where he least expects it, in their own backyard. This can be accomplished through long (five to ten day) dismounted movements, through restrictive terrain, at company and platoon levels in order to out maneuver the enemy to a place of our tactical choosing. Loading down Marines with ninety pounds of gear and PPE reduces the ability to maneuver, seize the initiative and move quickly on the battlefield thus giving the enemy the opportunity to out maneuver Marines and place us in a position of disadvantage.

The Combat Leader, Analyzing the Situation, Accepting Risk and Making a Decision

The combat leader's ability to analyze a situation and make a decision in a timely manner are essential to the success of maneuver warfare. Decentralization of command provides Marine leaders with the discretionary decision making ability to make instantaneous life or death decisions. This discretionary decision component is incumbent upon the commander to rapidly analyze and understand the situation and what steps should be taken to generate decisive results. Risks are inherent to warfare and commanders should be encouraged to take calculated risk to be more successful against our enemy. MCDP-1 *Warfighting* clearly articulates the important role the combat leader plays in maneuver warfare:

“The art of war requires the initiative ability to grasp the essence of a unique military situation and the creative ability to devise a practical solution.” (MCDP-1 pg. 18)

“Our philosophy requires competent leadership at all levels. . . A decentralized system requires leaders at all levels to demonstrate sound and timely judgment. Initiative becomes an essential condition of competence among commanders.” (MCDP-1 pg. 81)

“We should base our decisions on awareness rather than on mechanical habit. That is, we act on a keen appreciation for the essential factors that make the each situation unique instead of from conditioned response. We must have the moral courage to make tough decisions in the face of uncertainty and to accept full responsibilities for those decisions.” (MCDP-1 pg. 86)

When it comes to the wear of PPE, Marine commanders at all levels are provided minimal discretionary decision making ability regarding the wear of PPE regardless of the tactical situation or mission.

Recommendation

Current PPE is entirely too restrictive, heavy and cumbersome when utilized by dismounted Marines conducting combat operations. The current PPE, with an overarching cocoon mentality, was developed and implemented as a result of persistent and deadly IED/VBIED attacks on mounted coalition forces throughout Iraq. The Marine Corps is failing to realize the importance, if not requirement, of all Marines to have the ability to shoot, move, communicate. In order to allow for this, the current PPE must be reduced in size, weight and intrusion. Commanders should have the ability to pick and choose different types of PPE suitable to their own particular METT-TSL.

Marine Corps leaders throughout every stage of their career are instructed on the fundamental utilization of METT-TSL to estimate a situation and develop a sound course of action based on that estimate. The prescribing of PPE should be no different. When examining on the current tactical situation in Afghanistan, the tactics, techniques and procedures of enemy

fighters and the terrain in which they operate, the importance of analyzing PPE and developing a sensible required combat gear load is paramount. Simply stated, Marines cannot operate effectively in the mountainous and highly restrictive terrain of Eastern Afghanistan wearing the required Marine Corps PPE. Commanders at the company and battalion level should be empowered and encouraged to prescribe their own individual combat load based off their own estimate of the situation (METT-TSL), their commander's intent and personal discretion based off of experience, common sense and tactical acumen.

When conducting offensive operations in the mountainous terrain of Eastern Afghanistan the combat load and PPE requirement should be Maneuver Warfare centric. The negative aspects associated with the wear of PPE far outweigh the benefits. The wear of PPE in mountainous terrain decreases stamina, situational awareness, visibility, and maneuverability while at the same time increasing fatigue and associated deadly human factors. The combat load and PPE should focus on speed, maneuverability, survivability (water and clothes) and lethality (weapons and ammunition).

Conclusion

The current Marine Corps policy on the wear of PPE is a mindless solution intended to protect itself from politicians meddling in military affairs⁴ who continually demand more and more PPE to protect military personnel. The current mindset in the Marine Corps is that it is easier to justify a death in Afghanistan no matter the situation if the Marine is wearing the required ninety pound combat load with all PPE. If the Marine Corps is to be successful, both tactically and operationally, in Afghanistan, then leaders at the Company and Battalion level must be provided the power and discretion to take appropriate risks regarding the wear of PPE in order to out maneuver and defeat the highly mobile enemy forces in Afghanistan.

¹ <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/07/11/news/military.php>

² <http://blog.fortiusone.com/2008/10/28/violence-in-iraq-and-afghanistan-pre-and-post-%E2%80%9Csurge%E2%80%9D-part-iv/>

³ “Marines in Combat Still Seek a Better Flak Vest”

<http://www.onenewsnow.com/AP/Search/World/Default.aspx?id=373214>

⁴ “Real Security: Protecting America and Restoring our Leadership in the World.”

http://democrats.senate.gov/pdfs/RealSecurity_web.pdf